

MINDSHIFT AT THE NORTHERN INDIANA COMPUTER CONSORTIUM FOR LIBRARIES

by Linda Yoder



he challenge of each organization in the 21st century is to adapt... accelerate... innovate... learn... and transform itself to fit the world's constantly changing conditions, according to author Price Pritchett, in his book titled *Mindshift: The*

*Employee Handbook for Understanding the Changing World of Work.*¹ With the development of the computer and improvements in telecommunications, horsepower is giving away to brainpower. The world of work is being completely transformed. Pritchett advocates that we take personal responsibility for embracing new technology, taking on temporary structures to suit the situation at hand, a so-called moving of the walls to make sure our organization functions in the Information Age.

In July 1998, ten libraries moved the walls to redefine the way we do our work. Those ten libraries who met nearly six years ago to begin this venture are Argos Public Library, Bell Memorial Public Library (Mentone), Bourbon Public Library, Bristol Public Library, Middlebury Community Public Library, Milford Public Library, Nappanee Public Library, New Carlisle Public Library, Syracuse Public Library and Wakarusa Public Library. At the onset, these libraries received matching funds from the Indiana State Library to support the first contract period. The vision was to join together to hire one computer support provider to address the technology needs of member libraries of all sizes and levels of experience. Today, the Northern Indiana Computer Consortium for Libraries (NICCL) has 47 members in 21 counties. What follows is a glimpse of the mindshifts that have occurred as together we address the rapid changes that are today's technology-driven realities.

From the start, each library was looking for affordable computer support to help guide in the implementation of technology. While the needs varied from one library to the next, there were common issues:

- Many were paying \$75 to \$125 per hour for computer support.
- Most of the libraries were working with a computer support company or individual who only had one library as a client.

- With grant funding available for technology, many of the libraries were researching solutions to the same or similar needs or directions.

Armed with a mission to cultivate a technology consultant as an expert in services specific to libraries in a manner that is affordable and available to each library regardless of size or budget, the following plan emerged and was set into place.

ORGANIZATION

Two agreements provide the structure for this group project. An Interlocal Agreement between the participating libraries defines how the libraries interact as a group. One library is designated as the Accounts Payable Library. This Library receives payments from the member libraries for purchase of hours. The Accounts Payable Library also issues monthly payments on behalf of the group to the Service Provider.

The Computer Support Agreement outlines the interaction of the Group with the Service Provider. The following terms were incorporated into this agreement to provide the flexibility to best meet the needs of libraries of different size and at different levels of development in the use of technology. These guidelines also keep it a manageable contract for the Provider, knowing that efficient use of their time and resources builds their profit margin and encourages a long term commitment which in the end benefits member libraries as well. For example, during the past five years, the Service Provider has become familiar with many library affiliations such as the Indiana State Library, the Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA), the Indiana Higher Education Telecommunications System (IHETS), and various vendors of library application software including Ameritech Library Services, EOS International, and SIRSI. Each interaction builds knowledge and awareness that carries over to every member library either directly or indirectly.

TERMS

Services include software installation and upgrades, programming, troubleshooting hardware and software

conflicts or problems, peripheral installation, software and hardware specification and configuration, consultation, network design and configuration, and training.

Each library may choose “scheduled,” “as needed” or “routed” service calls. If the library chooses a regular schedule of service time where the technician is on-site a minimum of 4 hours per trip, no travel time is charged to the library. If the library chooses “as needed” service, support time is arranged at least one week in advance and one-way per hour travel time is charged to their account. “Route service” can be scheduled as many as five times per week or as little as once per month. The technician arrives at a regular pre-designated time for a minimum of two hours.

For emergency calls, a technician arrives within 24 hours of the call. Recognizing that some libraries could need evening and weekend technical support hours for upgrades or special projects, the Computer Support Agreement includes regular rates for special arrangements that are made at least one week in advance. Emergency weekend and evening rates (after 5 pm Friday and before 7 am Monday) are billed at double time. Phone and remote access support are billed at the hourly rate divided to the minute.

To provide accountability and assurance of performance, the Provider is paid in monthly installments by the Accounts Payable Library with a percentage of the contract withheld until the end of the contract period pending settlement of any disputes between the libraries and the Service Provider.

GROUP BENEFITS

Three words summarize the benefits as a whole: affordable, flexible, and experience.

Affordable:

- Computer support rates can equal \$75-\$125 per hour: Group Agreement rates are significantly discounted (\$45 or less...read on!)
- Each library pays only for actual hours used. Individual accounts are reconciled at the end of the contract period with refunds or credits and invoices issued accordingly.
- Employee benefits and payroll taxes associated with adding a staff position are eliminated.
- Libraries can budget for service time.
- Group purchasing can give competitive discounts on items from software and hardware to professional services or on-line resources

Flexible:

- Hours are used on “as needed” basis or can be on prearranged “scheduled” or “routed” visits (for example weekly, biweekly, monthly).

- Service time is “flexible function,” in that hours can be used for repairs, support, consultation, networking, programming, etc. to meet the needs of each individual library regardless of size, level of technology or expertise.

Experience:

- Provider has experienced, well trained group of technicians.
- A staff of employees (current Provider has seven) spends a combined 300 hours per week working with library clients often on issues specific to libraries.
- Knowledge gained from individual projects benefits the group.
- Standardization, though not required, increases productivity through familiarity.
- Customized training is offered in a classroom setting at the provider’s site or individual or group training at the library.

PROVIDER BENEFITS AND SELECTION

For the Service Provider, the benefits of this arrangement are a steady income and a regular schedule. In addition, the commonalities in their client base with the addition of each library reduces the learning curve and results in a more efficient use of support time. To give the Provider essential information about each client, the first item on the agenda for new member libraries is a complete on-site inventory including all hardware, software and peripherals. The inventory provides basis for future recommendations for that individual library but also gives the Provider a more complete picture of what can be learned from one library to the next. The Provider again becomes more knowledgeable about libraries as a whole and can serve as a conduit for members to learn from each other.

There are several determining factors that should be considered when selecting a Service Provider. Beyond standard considerations such as checking references to establish the viability of the company and their reputation with existing clients, there are selection criteria particularly significant to a group agreement of this nature. For instance, with 47 member libraries and the potential for more to join, the size of the company is an important factor. Are there enough technicians to adequately cover a 21-county geographic area? How will the travel time be calculated for members who are “on the fringe” of the service area? Are there satellite offices or does the company have one base office?

The CEO’s vision for the future of technology and how that might translate to library services and needs is important. Is the company proactive or reactive? Are they focused on troubleshooting existing problems or

preventing them? Due to the competitive and rapid-changing nature of the business, it is not unusual to see a significant turnover in computer technicians within a company. What is the level of expertise at the company and how do well do they retain experienced employees? What kind of organizational structure do they have in place to deal with complexities of servicing multiple clients in library settings? Will they have one technician assigned to ten libraries, for instance, or will they have technicians who specialize? One technician may work on network setups while another may specialize in hardware repair. Our experience over the years has shown that there are pros and cons with each approach. On these issues in particular, most important is the company's commitment to the group and their responsiveness and willingness to adapt to what works and what doesn't.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

The NICCL member libraries meet a minimum of four times per year. An advisory group meets more frequently to set agenda for member meetings. Speakers are arranged as appropriate to cover topics such as CIPA (Children's Internet Protection Act), the USA PATRIOT Act or Cash Needs During Reassessment or the vision from the Indiana State Library for libraries, technology and distance learning. Direction for group activities is also discussed by the Advisory group. Examples are listed here.

Technology Grants

Collectively, NICCL member libraries have received \$609,333 in Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grants during the past four grant periods. Individual, partnership and group applications are submitted under a NICCL cover letter. The Service Provider takes the lead in writing specifications and providing the technical expertise to members as needed. The cover letter includes a description of technology standards established for the group. Projects have included Internet connections, Y2K compliance, the establishment of local area networks, retrospective conversion, implementation of on-line catalogs, and digitization.

Software Development

Summer Reading Program Plus was developed to register participants and track statistics. The program allows setups for branch libraries, multiple "reading" levels, and printed mailing labels.

Local Roots gives NICCL members opportunity to make genealogy records (obituaries, births, marriages) accessible on the Internet. Community Heritage Online gives those with extensive history collections the opportunity to automate photos, microfilm records, and audio or video clips.

Group Auction

On two occasions, member libraries have held a group auction to dispose of used computers and other library equipment, furniture, or materials. Savings in advertisement and auctioneer costs were advantages to the group as well as a larger overall sale.

Technology Standards

A NICCL Technology Committee maintains a standards manual with recommendations for General PC Security Standards, PC Standards, Network Standards, and Automated Accounting System Standards. The manual includes Indiana State Library Automation Guidelines and Indiana State Board of Accounts Guidelines.

Mentor Program

While each NICCL meeting is an opportunity to learn from each other, a mentor program helps support members on issues such as technology funding. A survey identified those who have experience and are willing to help establish a Library Capital Projects Fund or Library Improvement Reserve Fund, or help apply for Universal Service Fund discounts or other grants as they may be available.

Group Purchase Discounts

Due to the structure of the LSTA grant applications and the technology standards put in place by the NICCL Technology Committee, NICCL members have received significant discounts for projects such as Y2k compliance and local area network installations. Investigation and/or implementation of other products has occurred for filtering software, on-line reference services, spam blockers, on-line meeting room and events calendars and Internet access management software.

MOVING THE WALLS

Growing a technology consultant as an expert in services to libraries over the past five years has yielded additional services beyond those outlined in the original agreement. Beyond the basics, the Service Provider offers assistance in development of Technology Plans and bid documents. Thousands of dollars have been saved in building projects where the Provider has served as a knowledgeable consultant, not only familiar with the technology needs, but the bidding and construction process as well. The Provider serves as liaison between libraries and vendors and can coordinate meetings and site visits as needed with other experts to assist in the implementation of new technology.

Currently at 47 members, the group continues to grow. Both the Interlocal Agreement (between libraries) and the Computer Support Agreement (between the Group and the Service Provider) were reviewed by a

library attorney and the State Board of Accounts at the beginning of this Consortium. Each agreement was designed to incorporate new libraries at any time by amendment. Under terms of the current contracts, a minimum participation level is set at 40 hours at \$45 per hour for an initial cost of \$1,820. To add an amendment, a minimum purchase of an additional 20 hours is required for an additional total amount of \$900. A quantity discount is applied for purchases of 200 hours or more, reducing the rate to \$40.50 per hour. To date, 16,950 total hours have been purchased representing an investment of \$618,705 in technology support.

We are in the midst of another mindshift, a restructuring of the agreements to better manage the administration of the group and accommodate additional growth. The concept is proven; we're now shifting the walls to make room for the next changing shape.

At the same time, library groups from other states are forming similar alliances. And other local nonprofit organizations within a two-county area are looking at the model as well.

Pritchett clearly states that change is inevitable and most significantly so in the fast-paced technology and information services area. And through it all, creating a learning environment is key. As the walls shift around this concept, regardless of size or number of computers or types of needs, each library has better opportunity to put into place efficient and effective means for connecting with local schools and other educational institutions and libraries in the state, in the nation, and around the world to provide the best possible learning environment for all, both as information providers (allowing access to on-line catalogs and local collections and resources) and information seekers.

NICCL Members and Population Served

January 2004

Library	County Served	Population
Akron	Fulton	2,827
Argos	Marshall	3,764
Bell Memorial	Kosciusko	3,678
Bourbon	Marshall	2,970
Bremen	Marshall	8,584
Bristol	Elkhart	7,019
Butler Public Library	Dekalb	4,400
Carnegie Pub. Lib. of Steuben Co.	Steuben	13,982
Converse	Miami	3,107
Crown Point	Lake	33,069
Culver	Marshall	3,133
Decatur Public Library	Adams	9,528
Eckhart Public Library	Dekalb	12,976
Flora	Carroll	3,901
Francesville	Pulaski	1,979
Fremont	Steuben	6,543
Fulton County	Fulton	16,227
Garrett	DeKalb	8,834
Gas City	Grant	9,394
Huntington City-Twp. Pub. Lib.	Huntington	21,262
Jasper County	Jasper	27,947

Library	County Served	Population
Kendallville Public Library	Noble	16,783
Lake County Public Library	Lake	220,722
Ligonier	Noble	6,600
Marion	Grant	31,320
Middlebury	Elkhart	17,002
Milford	Kosciusko	4,597
Monterey	Pulaski	1,130
Nappanee	Elkhart	6,710
New Carlisle	St. Joseph	3,914
Noble County	Noble	22,892
North Judson	Starke	4,987
North Madison	Madison	21,031
North Manchester	Wabash	6,260
Peabody	Whitley	13,509
Pendleton	Madison	20,663
Plymouth	Marshall	18,609
Pulaski County	Pulaski	10,646
Roanoke Public Library	Huntington	1,495
South Whitley	Whitley	5,404
Starke County	Starke	18,569
Syracuse	Kosciusko	9,032
Tipton	Tipton	16,577
Wakarusa	Elkhart	5,732
Warren	Huntington	2,529
Warsaw	Kosciusko	25,262
Waterloo	DeKalb	3,114
Total		420,323

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NOTES

¹ Price Pritchett, ed., *Mindshift: The Employee Handbook for Understanding the Changing World of Work* (Dallas, TX: Pritchett and Associates, 1996).